

SITA IS SITA: EXPLORING POST FEMINISM FICTIVE SLOT OF DINA MEHTA

MADHU KAMRA & SEEMA ARORA

¹Department of English, Durga Mahavidhyalaya, Raipur (C.G.), India

²Department of Humanities, Shri Shankaracharya Institute of Professional
Management and Technology, Raipur (C.G.), India

ABSTRACT

Dina Mehta – the playwright, novelist and short story writer is a rebel in creativity by writing primarily for new women. She is a champion in her own special way for her emphasis is much on self- autonomy than combating gender victimization. Her concept of new woman is adorned with the glory of human dignity as “assertive being”. The paper understudy explores the concept of post feminism with reference to the short story of Dina Mehta to highlight her “equality portrayal” of woman demanding ‘womanhood’ in bold manner. The story understudy is an exemplary contribution to ‘Serious fiction’ for it calls upon women to identify and engineer social change for gender welfare along with ‘inner change’ It also brings to light a knowledge of the frighteningly complex minds that create moments of crisis in the lives of dedicated and devoted ‘homemakers’. The Story is much commensurate with our deep needs of today – as a ‘Pointer’ and not a ‘thought – adventure’

KEYWORDS: Post Feminism, Womanhood & Assertive Being

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INTRODUCTION

Does post feminism imply “death of feminism” or “anti-feminism”? John Howard, former Prime-minister of Australia announced – “We are in the post-feminist stage of the debate”. Did he reckon that the feminist battle had been won? Janelle Reinell in her article “States of Play: Feminism, Gender Studies and Performance writes – “Yes, we are in post feminism. What we extract is a time when the residues of feminism are still with us in terms of its history and some of it come but without the overreaching umbrella of an organized Social and Political movement”.

(“Post Feminism” and Are We in in).Sfonline.barnard.edu/ps/reinett2.html/)

Post feminism upholds women as entities with self-assured and self-reliant confidence. The concept is all about understanding the “differences” of gender and learning to live with distinctive identities. It also emphasizes the belief that biological ‘differences are unsurmountable yet equality of sexes’ can be maintained by readjustments. Anne Clark Bartlett names the concept as “The Politics of the Cool”. It refutes “trivialization of male” and “victimization of woman as inferior”.

Post feminism is challenged for its utility and need. One of the most important question raised is – Is postfeminism an extension of “new wave feminism” or “neofeminism”? In addition the prefix “post” to feminism has been accounted as derogatory and redundant. The claim that post feminism is an alternate to establish ‘sameness in sexes and not emphasizing ‘differences between the two biological variant beings have been made emphatic to

determine its purposiveness as a concept of equality'. Its mission word is mutual understanding through acknowledgement of differences.

Dina Mehta is a conscientious story teller who holds storytelling as a meticulous art that needs religious devotion and practice. She enlists the ingredients of the short story as –

...the first important ingredient of the short story is a passionate scrutiny of life on the part of the author. The second is a meticulous choice of words – because much has to be conveyed on a small canvas. The third is her/his power to evoke the reader's imagination so that the story embraces more than its own verbal confines and the particulars it deals with succeed in illustrating a universal truth.

(*Indian Women Novelists*, Set I, vol. I, 126)

Dina Mehta's contribution is an add on to creative contribution for it not only illuminates life but also ascribes newness to the technique of writing. Maintaining neat clarity of the shape and essence of the short story, she says in an interview with T.N. Geetha –

... the structure of a good short story is many-tiered and works on more levels than one. The narrative moves from A to B to C but something more is happening on a level beneath the surface so that the good story is also moving in a vertical thrust from A¹ to A² to A³... and this is what gives it a greater dimension and significance. (*Indian Woman Novelists*, 127)

Comparing a short story to a novel Dina Mehta calls the latter as "lazy and self-indulgent" and the former "direct and energetic". To her 'voice' is the key feature of a story – "the cerebral and the emotional stance" which makes a short story sound from 'within' the work rather from the writer.

Dina Mehta is not a traditional short story teller; experimenting with theme and style is her forte. To her a short story is a passionate scrutiny of life "with meticulous choice of words to evoke the reader's imagination to assimilate universal truth". She elaborates on her conception of a short story as –

The short story, whether brief or elaborate has the power to illuminate life beyond the immediate concerns of its plot or characters, its incidents and people.... It spreads beyond its own economy, though short it grows enormous.

(*Indian woman Novelists* 219)

"The Other Women and Other Stories": Explores the fate of a home-maker in the mesh of extra-marital relationship. The rebellion is what labels the protagonist as a post-feminist novelist. The women wailing for her lost love or love degraded as a demon is not her image of a lady deserted by her partner. With a cool head and intelligent probe the women protagonist gives a neck to neck fight with a complete composure. The transformation is not with an intent to demean the male counterpart but to uphold respect for Oneself.

Dina Mehta is more pronounced in her feminist creativity and permits sexual identity as easily as self-autonomy. Disgusted by her husband – Ram's conscious sexual lapses, Sita shuns her disarming passivity and offers herself willingly to Dilip – her husband's friend to enjoy physical proximity outside the periphery of marriage. Her sexual romance is so gratifying that in triumphant glee, she presents her husband with a glowing banquet of red carnations – announcing her conscious violation of values of chastity and fidelity much in imitation of her amorous husband. Sita as 'New Woman' does not mourn over the infidelity of her spouse but strives for the assertion of her individuality and identity:

The carnations do not justify Sita's infidelity but signify emergence of a confident woman who is convinced of the rightness of her action and who is willing to face whatever consequences may arise from it.... While Ram seeks absolution using flowers, Sita uses them to honestly proclaim her love outside marriage.

(*Indian Woman Novelists*, 173)

The close of the story has an ideological transformational dimension. It assigns not only autonomy but also self-assertion to woman even at the face of confrontation with the opposite gender. Here the purposive 'newness' of the story becomes happily intelligible. The power of the 'closure' is much in tune with what Catherine Belsey says in *Critical Practice*:

The moment of closure is the part at which the events of the of the story become fully intelligible to the reader. The most obvious instance is apparently 'open' and still contain an ideological closure on where the murderer is revealed and the motive made plain. (73)

To her, the short story is as marathon an affair as is a novel, for the canvas is smaller but more compact, compressed and disciplinarily consistent. Thematically, Dina Mehta is the voice of 'New Woman'. Her vision of women's predicament is sharply diagnostic and a rebel against time honored values of chastity and docility. Subordination and exploitation can overpower their steely confidence to combat with any ill whatsoever.

'Absolution' is the introductory story of the collection narrated in first person. The story starts with an abrupt beginning; the intruder is mentioned in the first line whereby the drama of conflict surfaces as a sapling soon to grow into a shrub. The discord or aridity in relationship is stressed whereby, the narrator's plight is communicated with sharp immediacy. The feel of severe estrangement resounds through active concrete images – "The first time my husband invited Evelyn home he watched me with cold, amused eyes.... I moved among our guests with composure, with the same smile for everyone, for I had long ceased to give Ram those wounded – dove looks that had so imitated him when I was a young bride with a brimming heart." (1) The assertion of masculinity in love apart for the realm of marriage is brought to the forefront with a personal and social perception. Man and society in a web well places the fate of the new "woman" with a 'new' consciousness –

"They looked at Evelyn with well-bred disdain and darted venomous little glances of pity at me, but oh how they envied her, her youth and her taut, brazen beauty." (3)

Sita watched her husband dance with his beloved Evelyn with an amused and triumphant look. She debates secretly with the fun around, the still existing "antiquated concepts about duty, virtue, endurance, submission and so on" (2)

Smiling painfully at everything Sita maintained her poise and equilibrium. She kept the distaste of Ram's concupiscence vanity at bay and consciously dropped a disarming passivity. Soon her fidelity to Ram is questioned by Dilip who retorts as –

"... your generic function in life dear Sita is to be a wife just as the generic function of a bania is to make money – isn't it so ordained... God, have you no will? Are you content to be just a bloody little angel?" (3)

Dilip's words made Sita reflect upon her state as a homemaker with no authority and recognition. The "cynical comprehension" in Dilip's eyes further added tongues of flame to the mind at unrest. Sita was cajoled by Ram by a bowl of

carnations – a habitual custom of offering as an absolution to atone every such assault of open infidelity – “he had to offer flowers at my shrine in expiation of his guilty deeds”(5)

The sinewy infidelity went on a sly until Dilip made a sudden appearance in good spirits when Ram had declared him to be sick and went on for a weekend all alone. Dilip and Sita under the magnetic pull of inviting sexuality surrender to the call of nature. The conjugation fills with a renewed sense of self glory and her “Womanness” spurts to full blossom which bewilders her husband the moment he sets his eyes on her:

I had to destroy a part of me before it could destroy all of me I must be mad, I thought, but I had no hesitation about what I was planning to do... (7)

I could see he was puzzled? Why not? There was something different about me, a radiance, a singular worth which he could not half but notice. (8)

The subtle assertion of ‘womanness’ springs up with exhilarating joy in the form of Sita using Rama’s tool, back for Ram this time after having enjoyed adultery out of hopelessness. Ram dazed at having shot by his weapon – a bowl of red carnations.

The story portrays the dexterity with which the man-woman relationship is projected. Here the prey and the predator are not fixed in their roles; the woman- prey slyly becomes the woman predator and this shatters the male-predator who had taken things in the light of privilege with no pangs of repentance. With the tables turned on him he sits tongue-tied, neither fit enough to retort nor to complain.

Dina Mehta’s story echoes the efforts, of the ‘new woman’ in establishing herself as a ‘wise’ entity. The wisdom of ‘Sita saves her from the humiliation of being neglected’ when her husband sleep with ladies around pretending to be on office-duty. Her attack shows that she is not an object to be played with; her subjectivity is her own assertion. Sita’s post-feminist stance asserts her mental and emotional empowerment by taking her life in her hands and by making choices for herself. Joel Chan writes – post feminism is about regaining what’s lost. (Post Feminism-and-Popular-Culture. (<https://feminist theory faction nil. Wordpress.com/category>)). The story understudy amplifies the form of post feminism or self-expression, freedom of experience and sexual flexibility, hence the stalwart cause is well proved.

The short story ‘Absolution’ has an antiseptic close – “the heroic bid of an ordinary urban woman, betrayed in marriage, to assert her individuality and to find happiness that was denied to her earlier.” (Infidelity and Betrayal: A Study of Feminine Reaction in Dina Mehta’s *The other Woman and other stories*. *Indian Woman Novelists*, 173)

Sita is a woman of exemplary endurance and mental strength. She is equally dynamic and energetic and plays her role with profound sense of responsibility. By maintaining poise at the beginning and strong retaliation at the close, she appears as a strong-willed judicious woman. As a fine manager, she succeeds in discharging her duty and her responsibility to emphasize virtuosity and goodness. With her influential role, she shows her indomitable spirit to stand against all opposition. Despite her composure, she gives every opportunity of repentance to her philanderer husband who “--- was burdened with a crushing load of guilt a groveling something persisted in his attitude towards me, so that he had to offer flowers at my shrine in expiation of his guilty deeds.” (5). Unlike Ram, Sita does not feel guilty on her new permissive order – maintaining extra-marital relationship with Dilip. For sometimes she does wallow in self – shame and chastises herself as shameless and wanton but leap over such distasteful feelings and delves happily into her new-found happiness. She willfully and vigorously sidelines her traditional aspect and enjoys life primarily as an individual. Dina

Mehta finds this story an utmost satisfactory piece of writing for herein “the voice of the old fashioned wife sounds authentic – and also the story line is strong” (*Indian Woman Novelists*, 29)

The role of Sita as an innocent wife is ‘round’ (to use E.M. Forster’s coinage) for all of a sudden she crushes her naiveté and gullibility and braves her emotional battering by consciously yielding to the temptation posed by Dilip. Sita’s silent combat with her husband’s regular sexual lapses questions the efficacy of womanly virtues like chastity, devotion and submission in relation to a men’s commitment to marriage. G.S. Balarama Gupta weighing the purposive intent of this collection says –

Dina Mehta’s women characters ... are modern and representative of the awakened woman in the sense that their “Puritanism is poised against the sensual”; they protest against social conformity (unlike Shashi Deshpande) in a bid to register their displeasure with their men who nonchalantly flout the moral code which they want only their women to follow as much as to give vent to their inner drives towards self-actualization.

(“Indian English Woman Short Story Writers: An Overview” *Vikram Journal of English Studies* vol. 1 1993. pp. 37-49)

CONCLUSIONS

The story understudy projects the idea that the classical feminine stereotypes still remain very powerful to put women on the margin. Though educated with high qualification women are mentally conditioned that the ultimate end of their beauty and academic excellence is to get married and ‘live happily thereafter’ in their roles of a wife, mother or income-supplement. Sita’s counterattack is symbolic of the rise of new woman who is conscious of her individuality in both family and society and makes an effective attempt to redeem herself from the noose of male domination. Her rebellion voices the need to disobey the rules formulated by man that make unmeasurable demands and emphasizes legitimate feminine expectations in terms of gender roles and societal expectations.

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